

# ISSUES AND ANSWERS: WAYS OF TEACHING WRITING AND COMMUNICATION TO UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS AND COMMERCE STUDENTS IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

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In November 2006, I received a request from administrators in the undergraduate Commerce program at the University of Toronto for information about the types of instruction in Business Communication offered in other universities. An external review last year had recommended strongly that Commerce should institute such instruction (see [http://www.utoronto.ca/commerce/pdf/CP\\_External\\_Review\\_2006.pdf](http://www.utoronto.ca/commerce/pdf/CP_External_Review_2006.pdf)). At present, students in Commerce are encouraged to take "breadth" courses in the Faculty of Arts and Science, and they have access to the college Writing Centres. Courses taught in their own faculty, however, do not emphasize writing, and no direct instruction is offered on professional writing or speaking.

My first recommendation was to start close to home by looking at the new first-year course on Engineering Strategies and Practices offered here at U of T (see <http://www.ecf.utoronto.ca/~apsesp/espintro.htm>). This required course uses both large-class lectures and multiple types of small-group tutorials. It combines an introduction to issues in Engineering design with experience in real-world group projects and instruction in the types of written and oral communication needed to carry through the projects. The course is co-taught by Engineering faculty and Communication faculty, including some specialized ESL instructors. It provides the foundation for students' continued use and development of communication skills in courses throughout the Engineering curriculum.

I then turned to colleagues across Canada by sending out inquiries to the CASLL, CATTW, and STLHE listservs. I received useful and stimulating replies from twelve people in a range of positions at nine other universities. Although their responses do not give a complete picture of current practice, they suggest some directions of current program design. This report notes the main topics that arose in the exchange; it then excerpts relevant passages to provide more detail and further contact information.

## ISSUES RAISED

These are the main topics of the responses I received:

1. Respondents pointed out the many problems with student motivation and commitment when required "service" courses are taught outside the business faculties. These problems are compounded when courses are taught in large lecture classes.
2. Communication courses are offered at all levels. Of the ten described in the responses, four came in first year, two in second year, three in third year, and one in fourth year. The upper-year courses take advantage of the greater motivation and situational knowledge of experienced students (see the first Simon Fraser response).
3. Half the courses mentioned are required, half are optional. This aspect is not determined by the year in which they are offered.

4. Most courses combine oral communication with a main focus on writing. Most use some group work and include online communication as a topic. All include attention to language conventions. Two universities are piloting or planning online versions focussing on writing only (Calgary, Laurentian).
5. Most courses go well beyond the "parade of genres" approach that was once standard in business communication courses. Recognizing graduates' needs to adapt to changing situations and roles, they teach the rhetorical strategies of analysing audience and designing appropriate structures and modes. Students write and speak in a variety of forms.
6. The responses describe some strikingly inventive teaching methods, including three based on inquiry approaches (Calgary, UTM and York) where students explore ideas and situations independently and in groups rather than just following a set of given prompts. Other innovative methods include the use of simulated clients for practice in oral communication situations (Ryerson, second response) and of mentors for support, especially of ESL learners (Guelph and Simon Fraser).
7. Among my respondents, only Simon Fraser attempts integration of communication instruction throughout its Business program, as part of the new Writing-Intensive Initiative at that university (see <http://www.lidc.sfu.ca/teaching/writing/>). A special program trains and supervises undergraduates to provide support for other students. Simon Fraser also requires a third-year communication course.

## EXCERPTS FROM RESPONSES

This section quotes passages from the 25 or so email messages that responded to my original request. It lists the responses by university name in alphabetical order, and prefaces them by short notes referring to the issues noted above. Contact information and further website addresses are also included.

**CALGARY** [second-year required inquiry-based course now in multiple sections, given by Faculty of Communication and Culture to students from Haskayne School of Business and other disciplinary areas]: response by Doug Brent, Associate Dean, Faculty of Communication and Culture, (403) 274-2942, [dabrent@ucalgary.ca](mailto:dabrent@ucalgary.ca). See also the archive of course material at [www.ucalgary.ca/coms363/](http://www.ucalgary.ca/coms363/).

COMS363 is a course for second year and above. ...The course is mandatory for all Business and Engineering students and heavily pressed on students in Computer Science, Geography, and several other programs. Some of our own Communications Studies students even take it! As a result it serves about 1400 students a year. ...

First of my two cents: running a course like this as a huge megasection with tutorials sort of works but it's iffy. Successive teams of instructors (Tania Smith and Doug Hare, Helen Holmes and Doug Hare, myself and Andrea Williams) were unable to make the subject of writing exciting enough to rapture an audience of 300, who therefore simply did not come. Smaller sections, on the other hand, seem to work even though the curriculum gets more scattered.

Second cent: we are piloting an on-line version of the course on the assumption that electronic text might actually be the ideal medium for a writing course. To do this we have had to give up the oral component, which we are not happy about, but are trying to keep a collaborative component, utilizing the strength of the multidisciplinary audience. Early anecdotal reports are positive but we have not tried to ramp it up past the pilot stage yet.

A third cent, though I was only asked for two: one of the features of the megasection experiment which Tania spearheaded and which we have been trying to hold onto is a Boyer-inspired emphasis on inquiry-based research rather than writing fundamentals AKA correctness. This is a hard message to get across to legions of sessional instructors, and one of the advantages of the megasection was having a full time rhetorician in charge who could keep at this message, but we think we've held onto a fragment of it.

NOTE from MP: See [www.ucalgary.ca/coms363/](http://www.ucalgary.ca/coms363/) for an archive of the full course notes and assignments for the first iteration of the course. The students' main task is to produce a report about the actual daily use of communication strategies by a working professional. This involves interviews, email correspondence, presentations to small and large groups, a literature review of relevant theory and other ethnographic studies, and the writing of a substantial research document through several drafts. See also Doug Brent's draft article on how the design of this course applies activity theory: [www.stu.ca/inkshed/brenttxt.htm](http://www.stu.ca/inkshed/brenttxt.htm).

**DALHOUSIE** [now two first-year required courses, was one second-year required course to prepare students for co-op placements]: response from Margie Clow Bohan, formerly a faculty member teaching Applied Psychology in the School of Business; now Coordinator, Dalhousie Writing Resource Centre, [www.writingcentre.dal.ca](http://www.writingcentre.dal.ca), 902-494-3379, [C.Bohan@dal.ca](mailto:C.Bohan@dal.ca).

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to make changes in the School of Business communication courses. The School had used a second year, half-credit course to prepare the students for the writing demands during their first of three co-op internships. It was fairly successful, at least from their perspective. (After the second year winter co-op term, we polled the students asking which course -- 15 courses at that point in their university career -- had best prepared them for their work term. Out of 80 students, 79 answered that Business Communication had. It was quite amazing.)

However, there were big challenges in using only a half-credit course. It was packed with communication theory, basic writing skills, and business document writing. We used the Canadian edition of Kitty Locker's book. In 2005, the School changed to a two half-course package of communication classes [in first year]. The first one, 1701, stresses written communication, with the second, 1702, tackling oral communication. Although I have moved to the Writing Centre, I have heard that the courses have done well in terms of starting the "you're at university and you have to be ready for the workplace", but some of the intent of the courses has not been undertaken.

. . . Communication courses are more helpful when they are co-managed so that the content is integrated into the marking rubric. If the writing/oral communication skills are to be developed, they must be used in subsequent years using a strong tie-in with other classes. So far, other profs have not voluntarily jumped into the mix. If I were UofT, I would develop a complete package, one where there are frequent developmental assessments and links as the students move through their undergraduate degree. A capstone class, finally, that emphasizes both the content (often a business strategy class) and writing/oral communication is recommended.

**GUELPH** [first-year required courses, small classes, both undergrad and MBA levels; use of writing advisors for ESL learners]: response from Joan Flaherty, [jflahert@uoguelph.ca](mailto:jflahert@uoguelph.ca).

I teach communications in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management (within the College of Management and Economics) to both undergrads and MBA students. The undergrad course is called Hospitality and Tourism Business Communications; the grad course is called Management Communications.

Both courses are core, taken near the start of the programs. When I say "communications" I'm referring to business writing and presentation skills -- 3 hours a week for 12 weeks, taken for credit. The focus is on individual development, which means only individual assignments (as opposed to group assignments). This focus also means a class cap of 40 for the undergrad class, while the cap is set at 35 for the grad class.

Your concern about the large number of ESL students isn't really an issue for us at the undergrad level. It is, though, at the grad level; consequently, the School also provides the MBA students with extra, one-on-one writing help in the form of "writing advisors" who work on an "as needed" basis.

Both courses have been well received by students and well supported by other faculty. In fact, a few years ago when the School conducted an internal review of its curriculum, one of the student recommendations was the need for a second communications course, one that focused on the somewhat strange combination of grammar and instruction in PowerPoint :) Partly in response to this recommendation, I put together a proposal for additional communications instruction at the first semester level for which I recently received approval to develop -- one more reason I'm particularly interested in what Commerce does at U of T.

**LAURENTIAN** [optional first-year course, wide coverage of genres and issues, much practice, small class size]; response from Leda Culliford, Writing Counsellor, Writing Assistance Program, [lculliford@laurentian.ca](mailto:lculliford@laurentian.ca).

[Since] six years ago, a course in Business Communication, COMM1206, has been running at least 3 times a year--it's a very popular course. It is not mandatory for Commerce students, but the majority of them take it.

COMM1206 is only a 3-credit course, so there is a great deal to do in a short time; I try to emphasize realism, spending time on globalism, the problems of cultural differences, the impact of everchanging technology, cases that examine problems with communication in the workplace, and so on. I bring in documents that I receive and the students do the same--it's something they enjoy. We also spend time on research and one of their assignments is based on this.

As well, of course, we spend time writing, covering as many kinds of business documents as possible and emphasizing the ones they are most likely to encounter. I try to have the students write in every class, either individually or in groups. Oral presentations are another aspect--they do a major one that involves working in a group (good for the team element so popular in business) and involves the production of several documents along the way, such as an initial memo, progress report, audience handout, and so on.

Cramming all this in is difficult, but creates a good replication of the business world's fast pace! I recently received some good news

about the course, too--I will be writing an on-line distance version in the near future.

**MOUNT ST. VINCENT**, Halifax [no required course, one second-year optional half course]: response from Susan Drain, Department of English and 2006 3M Fellowship Award winner, [Susan.Drain@msvu.ca](mailto:Susan.Drain@msvu.ca).

Our business department used to require that all students took English 1120, Writing Theory and Practice, but several years ago they decided they would rescind that requirement. The required courses in the program do not include any explicit writing instruction; to the best of my knowledge (and I sit on the university-wide writing initiatives committee) there is no WID/WAC in the department. There is a second-year half-year (.5 unit) course called "Communications Management" which may be taken as an elective. Students in the program must also take a .5 course in Humanities and a further 3.5 units in arts and science. Not a model for U of T! I heartily endorse your engineering faculty model.

**RYERSON** [range of required courses tailored to different disciplinary areas, including Business; traditional curriculum being redesigned]: response from Jean Mason, Faculty of Communication and Design, [jmason@ryerson.ca](mailto:jmason@ryerson.ca).

Our department (Professional Communication) provides courses and a minor to many programs across the university. Business and Engineering are especially big "clients." The courses tend to be tailored to a Writing in the Disciplines orientation, as sections are more or less discipline specific. Oral communication is included in many courses, and also addressed exclusively in a dedicated course. Curriculum tends to adhere to a traditional model that is skills-based and product-oriented. This is partly due to the large number of students we serve--close to 5000 undergrads per year--since a process-based approach using, for example, portfolio assessment demands more intensive management and, thus, time. In addition to being time-intensive, process-based / whole language curriculum requires specialized training and a level of faculty support and dedication that is not always feasible in a department that includes a large number of part-time instructors. As is fairly typical in institutions where students from a range of programs receive "writing" or "communication" instruction from a "service" department, faculty in the departments who are served have varying understandings of what constitutes good writing/communication and often overly optimistic expectations for a single-semester course. However, our courses and especially our minor enjoy a high approval rate among students and faculty, and I do believe students benefit from these courses on pedagogical, professional, and personal levels.

**RYERSON** [simulated clients for oral communication, played by trained actor/facilitators]: response from Rheta Rosen, [rrosen@ryerson.ca](mailto:rrosen@ryerson.ca).

I am the Research and Education Liaison of the Interpersonal Skills Teaching Centre (ISTC) Simulated Client Program at Ryerson University. This is a very well developed program designed specifically to enhance students' communication skills in preparation for their prospective professional careers. The program has been in operation since 1990. Actors are trained as simulators to portray a wide variety of roles, faculty members choose scenarios they would like demonstrated in their courses from a catalogue of over 60 scenarios, and the students get to interact in real time with these simulators in a low risk environment. (In addition to the catalogue of simulations available, the Centre creates customized simulations to meet the specific needs of faculty members.) A unique aspect of this program is that

the simulators are trained to provide constructive, immediate feedback to the students. Our research has demonstrated that Ryerson faculty find simulation very helpful in achieving their teaching objectives and students report that their interaction with the simulators is extremely helpful to their learning. For more information please visit our web site at <http://www.ryerson.ca/istc>. There are 7 and 20 minute video clips on the site that offer further insight into the program.

**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY** [fourth-year required course in previous curriculum, focus on types of writing done in university program]: response from Anne Hungerford, [hungerfo@sfu.ca](mailto:hungerfo@sfu.ca).

Over a decade ago, I was asked to design a business writing course for the Faculty of Business Administration at SFU. They, too, wanted a first-year course, but I persuaded them that the best audience for a course that focused on workplace writing was fourth-year students, who were close to graduation and had done practicums in business.

I had several reasons for making this request: 1) The assignments in most of the undergraduate commerce courses were either academic papers or academic/workplace hybrids, and students in first year really wanted to know how to achieve better marks in these writing tasks. 2) First-year students were too far away from the day when they would be asked to write workplace documents and too distant from workplace contexts. 3) Fourth-year students had some experience in the business world, had mastered academic writing, and were ready to look at crossing discourse community boundaries.

I taught this course only once, because the Faculty subsequently decided to put in a full writing program. But the course was a great success. (The students ranked the instruction first among all the business courses they had taken that semester.) I used, among other approaches, case studies, genre analysis, and guest speakers.

**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY** [integrated writing instruction, use of Writing Mentors; also a third-year required course]: message from Kevin G. Stewart, Senior Lecturer, Management and Organization Studies Coordinator, FBA Writing Mentorship Program, SFU Faculty of Business, [kstewart@sfu.ca](mailto:kstewart@sfu.ca).

We've done a couple of very innovative things here in the faculty in terms of our communications and writing curriculum and support for students.

1) Back in 2002, I created the FBA Writing Mentorship program, a program in which I recruit strong undergraduate writers, train them in ethical tutoring practices, and supervise them as they volunteer their time to mentor other business undergraduates engaged in writing. In its first five years, the program has generated over 2,700 volunteer hours in the faculty. We have documented almost 2,000 contact sessions with students, an average of 140 mentoring contacts each semester. During this period, I have recruited, trained, and supervised 43 undergraduate writing mentors.

This program has created a strong support system for our students and helped to create a culture of communication within our faculty. The volunteer mentors have also gained exceptional skills and experience.

2) In 2005 I redesigned the curriculum for BUS 360 (Business Communications), a 3rd year course that is a requirement for any 4th year business courses. The focus of the redesign was to make the course into a Writing-Intensive offering in line with the SFU undergraduate curriculum

redesign. The course focuses on planning, process, professional image, and critical thinking as these apply to business writing.

The course is viewed by most business students as one of the most demanding at SFU. However, focus groups of our graduating students and alumni have revealed that it is a course they all highly value in hindsight once they are in the workforce.

**U of T at MISSISSAUGA** [third-year optional course in undergraduate Professional Writing and Communication program (PWC), small class; required course for MMBA program; inquiry and expressivist bases for both courses]: response by Guy Allen, [guy.allen@utoronto.ca](mailto:guy.allen@utoronto.ca).

The Finance and Writing course I am teaching in PWC assumes nothing about students' backgrounds in financial analysis, an interest of mine that I have made into a course. But students from all backgrounds have learned quickly. As in other PWC courses, Finance and Writing centres on a project (a microcap company) that the students choose. They do original research, write five journalistic articles on the company, and produce a comprehensive financial report on the company, a document I tell them readers should be able to finish in less than seven minutes (no paragraphs allowed). By the way, Commerce students, even 4th year students, often credit this course with blowing away the fog around financial analysis: I see it for the first time, some say.

For MMPA (financial accounting MBA) students, I teach a course that includes:

- 1) two written autobiographical narratives
- 2) one videotaped autobiographical narrative presented as part of a group project and discussed by the whole class
- 3) one financial research project culminating in a report--the microcap project as above.

I started out trying to teach these [graduate] students to write. They don't want to know. Anyone who recites the liturgy of correctness with these students will have a rough, rough time. But if you show them a way to do things that will make them look good in the corporations, they'll work hard at it.

**YORK**, Atkinson College [third-year course, inquiry focus, small class]: response from Leslie Sanders, University Professor of English and Director of Atkinson College Writing Centre, [leslie@yorku.ca](mailto:leslie@yorku.ca).

At York University, Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies, we have two courses related to business. Both are small class format: The older one, WRIT 3988 3.0 "Writing in the Workplace," uses a Problem-Based Learning model. The idea is to group the genres they practice and develop (from memo to report, executive summary and presentation) around an inquiry that a small group is pursuing; e.g., ergonomic furniture for the nursing station. The course begins with some basic consideration of audience. Group work and peer editing are part of the course. *Worlds Apart: Acting & Writing in Academic & Workplace Contexts* by Freedman, Medway, Paré, and Dias was helpful to me in developing this course.

More recently, we developed WRIT 2000 3.0 "Research and Writing About Business". In this course, students are familiarized with the appropriate indices for professional and academic sources, and pursue a variety of topics. The basic text at present is Wilson, *Working Words: A Business-Based Reader* (Thompson Nelson), and we also use a course kit.